United Nations E/CN.6/2019/NGO/133

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
27 November 2018

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-third session
11–22 March 2019
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Asociación Nacional Cívica Femenina, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

18-20390 (E) 211218 211218

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Statement

[Original: Spanish]

Opening new fronts in old battles: promoting the empowerment of women through social development and labour and cultural structures

Among the many problems affecting gender equality and the development of women today is a failure to create effective policies for real and lasting development to guarantee equal opportunities for men and women. Great efforts have been made, but much remains to be done. Now is not the time to scale back gender equality efforts. On the contrary, we must rethink our approach to the problem by analysing social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The first step is to take a holistic social view that encompasses both the macro and micro perspectives, which are generally tackled separately. Often, public policies devised to address the problem do not reflect an understanding of the cultural and individual variables at play, or have been designed to address public and private problems separately without the understanding that whatever happens in a person's immediate surroundings will affect what that person brings to the public sphere, and that many inequalities and injustices first arise in the individual's private (microsocial) sphere. This is why a people-centred approach to social policy is needed, with an emphasis on social impact. When social policy is people-centred, it highlights the urgent need to return to issues that might seem to be old battles, but are more relevant now than ever before. Hence the importance of creating space to include these persistent problems in the broader discussion about the development of women and gender equality.

Challenge

Lack of policies promoting work-family balance

It is essential to recognize the need to promote the economic empowerment of women in today's changing world of work, including by analysing the challenges and opportunities available to women and by removing obstacles preventing them from fully exercising all of their rights, including economic, social, cultural and political rights. It is also essential to recognize the multidimensional nature of people's lives, and we emphasize that promoting the economic empowerment of women is not possible without also empowering them in their social, family, political and emotional lives.

Men and women are demanding social and labour structures that accommodate working parents and make it easier for employees to work from home, with leave arrangements that allow them to fulfil their family responsibilities without suffering adverse consequences. Improving employment law and work-family balance is a formidable challenge for developing countries where non-existent or deficient labour systems leave a large portion of the population without benefits, entitlements and workers' rights, leading to exploitative conditions and injustice for families. We are living in a world where fathers and mothers do not have social security, paid leave, fixed work schedules, fair pay, pensions or job stability, and yet they bear the responsibility of providing a decent life for their family members.

Adequate conditions for every worker must be ensured, which is why we emphasize the promotion of practices that foster work-family balance and that provide

space for individual development, first and foremost by guaranteeing that breaks, work schedules and leave will be respected.

It is important to recognize that these challenges have become more complex as women have entered the labour market in increasing numbers, leading to an increased awareness of their specific needs, including flexible schedules, accommodations and adjustments to the workload of breastfeeding mothers, the provision of safe childcare facilities during working hours and school schedules that are compatible with parental work schedules.

We must move beyond talk of sanctions, punishments or obligations for labour institutions, focusing instead on truly promoting the dignity of motherhood and fatherhood within organizations. That is why we call for labour policies that include a family perspective and for incentives that encourage businesses to support and protect an environment in which women can be both mothers and professionals in the workplace. It is not a matter of burdening businesses and organizations by imposing difficult and costly conditions. Rather, it is a matter of creating incentives to encourage them to take sustainable actions that support and protect women in family life and at work, in a flexible environment.

Discarding the option of motherhood, judgment and stigmatization

We must recognize that women, throughout the stages of their lives, are affected by violent cultural, social and economic structures in addition to the discrimination and stigmatization that they endure as mothers and the lack of resources for their full and equal participation.

Women should not be pressured or pushed to believe that motherhood is less worthwhile, or that it represents a hardship, an obstacle, a loss of freedom or even a potential threat to life, society or the planet. Certain policies and programmes sustain existing inequalities by creating the impression that motherhood and professional development are contradictory in nature or that professional development requires a postponement of motherhood. They reinforce the message that a professional career is the only true form of achievement.

The stigmatization of motherhood is apparent in the views promoted by some sex education programmes, social policies and actions related to sexual and reproductive health, as well as by the media, that pushes women to fear pregnancy and motherhood, worry that they may regret becoming a mother, reject their bodies, avoid breastfeeding, or hide their pregnancies and leads to structurally violent practices, including the non-hiring of pregnant women or women of childbearing age. We must remember that while policies and the media have the power and responsibility to effect social change, they also have the power to perpetuate violence against and stigmatization of women.

Moreover, many countries lack policies to support pregnant women and mothers, in particular those living in vulnerable conditions, which may include the following: single-parent household; physical or mental health issues affecting the fetus or mother; pregnancy in adolescents or older mothers; pregnancy in a violent environment; and pregnancy resulting from rape. In the absence of programmes that provide social, political, economic, emotional or health care support to continue with the pregnancy, a significant majority of public policies, laws, initiatives and programmes are focused on urging women to terminate pregnancies under the above-mentioned conditions. A lack of opportunity ultimately infringes upon their freedom and development.

The result is that motherhood suffers from constant stigmatization and discrimination.

Recommendations

For the above reasons, we urge Member States to do the following:

- Actively promote policies to improve work-family balance in order to better reconcile their work and family lives and to build labour systems that guarantee the rights of workers
- Promote policies to integrate and reconcile work and family in the public and private spheres
- Reprioritize the rights of workers in the context of the right to freedom of development in order to improve conditions of justice, security and well-being in the workplace
- Urgently address the need for policies that protect pregnant women and mothers in vulnerable situations
- Promote policies that foster a culture of support and protection for fatherhood and motherhood with a gender-sensitive perspective that addresses the specific needs and vulnerability of women and mothers
- Recognize the contribution of motherhood to the current and future development of nations
- Guarantee social support for women in the workplace
- Create the social and political space to facilitate and encourage the participation of women in decision-making processes in public life